Much has been written on industrialisation, women’s roles and developments in gender history over the last twenty years. This has occasioned Katrina Honeyman to consider industrialisation in all its aspects through the “lens of gender.” This approach has given rise to an excellent discussion, not merely of the economic roles of women, but also the ways in which class became gendered.

An introductory chapter on “Feminist History and the Historiography of the Industrial Revolution” provides a useful summary of developments in women’s history, gender history and feminist history, ranging from adding women to the historical process to the influence of postmodernism and post-structuralism. Some of the most important reassessments of the Industrial Revolution have resulted from the work of feminist historians and these in turn have led to challenges to mainstream assumptions, allowing new perspectives to emerge.

The roles of working women and children in the industrial process are vital to the understanding of the nature of industrialisation. Furthermore, issues of gender have been crucial to the historiography of industrialisation. Against this background, Honeyman sets the two basic premises of her text: that industrialisation cannot be properly understood without reference to female labour; and that industrialisation should be understood as a gendered process.

Taking a feminist perspective, Honeyman is keen to emphasise that “Women should be seen not as separate, nor as passive, nor as simple victims, but as vital and essential to the making of industrialisation” (37). This puts paid to any lingering notions that the part they played was inferior to that of men. Women, like children, being a cheap form of labour, provided a viable alternative to the costs of mechanisation on the one hand, and on the other continued to provide casual labour for the factory system of production. Women’s contributions, however, were devalued, and Honeyman is in no doubt that women were paid less purely and simply because of discrimination. Women were seen as a threat to skilled men’s status both at home and at work. To protect themselves, men resorted to a variety of tactics including excluding women, marginalising them, modifying working practices and claiming new technology. Different trades reacted in different ways, just as women’s experiences differed according to geography and sector of industry. Artisans wanted to exclude women entirely while male textile workers consigned women to a secondary role. This theme of the ways in which skill became synonymous with masculinity is particularly well-developed. A skilled occupation became that which a woman did not do. Gender became central to
the structure of employment and thus industrialisation developed a “gendered set of practices” which worked to the detriment of women (141).

Women’s position was further adversely affected by the protective legislation of the 1830s and 1840s which, while seeing them as in need of care and protection (unlike men who were free agents, able to enter into contracts on their own behalves), reduced the hours they could work in textile factories and stopped them working underground, thus making them of less use to employers and consigning them to lowly-paid jobs. Industrialisation, therefore, was dependent on the undervaluing of women’s labour.

As the nineteenth century progressed, the gender division of labour led increasingly to the underutilisation of women and their consequent unemployment. Ideas of masculinity and femininity and the expected behaviour associated with both gradually determined women’s employment opportunities. The middle-class ideal of separate spheres, with the woman in charge of the house and the man the breadwinner, meant that working-class married women, while discouraged from entering the labour force, still had to find wage-paying activities if their families were to survive. Thus their need for wage-earning work in the home gave employers a cheap, flexible supply of labour to staff the expanding informal economy. Once again, women’s activities were crucial to the industrial system.

The ways in which constructs of femininity and masculinity affected the working classes in agriculture are also explored. Here, middle-class morality again came to the fore with attention focused on female farm labourers and field workers whose way of life was portrayed as immoral, unsexed and detrimental to family values, and in particular their children, i.e. a challenge to accepted notions of femininity. Such attitudes were eagerly taken up by the male National Agricultural Labourers Union who, believing women to be a threat to men’s wages and employment opportunities, used them to deter women from working.

The concept of women as a threat was central to the gendering of class. Honeyman has produced an excellent chapter on this theme. She shows that men and women initially worked together against challenges to their position, but by the early nineteenth century ideas of gender equality were declining, to be rejected completely by the 1840s. Working-class consciousness took a gendered approach which disempowered women and reduced their range of choices. Working-class women became marginalised in working-class politics, leaving them either as men’s supporters or to found their own female organisations. Male Chartists, for example, largely ignored women’s claims as workers and tried to ensure that women were excluded from the workplace: “Chartism...attempted to create class consciousness by drawing initially on traditions of sexual co-operation, but...ultimately failed because of the incompatibility of egalitarian ideals and the growing distinction of gender identities” (131). By mid-century, working-class politics was seen as the preserve of men, while the home was the preserve of women.
There will be those who continue to disagree with Honeyman’s conclusion that gender history and women’s history should no longer be seen as “subdisciplinary specialisms” but belong now to mainstream historical thought. They cannot, however, ignore her view that while they might not have changed traditional periodisation, they do offer “novel perspectives on conventional chronologies” (146). For those familiar with the specialist literature, *Women, Gender and Industrialisation in England, 1700—1870* will present no surprises. Nevertheless, this is an excellent book with a wider scope than its title might suggest. There is a very comprehensive bibliography and the book as a whole is fully referenced. It will be of great value to the undergraduate, the general reader and anyone wanting an up-to-date synthesis of the most recent research.

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In their street demonstrations militant suffragettes required that their supporters wear the delicate white gowns worn in the most genteel of homes. Is this evidence of the essentially frivolous nature of the well-heeled, middle-class suffragettes and their lack of serious political purpose, or an early example of publicity-conscious image-making? Caine and Sluga suggest it was the latter. It enabled the suffragettes to assume an ambiguous position in the light of the gender conventions of the day. While on the one hand seeming to confirm the very qualities of delicacy, passivity and purity which were used to justify the denial of their right to citizenship and participation in public life, they were, nevertheless, demanding a place for women within the public spaces of the streets and cities and within the democratic institutions of society, all places which men claimed for themselves. The authors suggest that this paradox lies at the heart of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century feminism; opposing the definition of citizenship which excluded women, but not wanting to challenge the definition of women’s identity as defenders of moral worth, as linchpins of the family and as mothers of the nation, which accompanied that exclusion.

Contradictions within women’s position in the gender order during the long nineteenth century provide one of the key themes of this book. Women throughout the period were challenging the denial of their full humanity and their citizenship; from the Society of Republican Revolutionary Women in France between 1790 and 1793 to the members of the women’s clubs in France, Germany and Italy in 1848, to the female communards of the Paris commune in 1870. Yet the momentary advances, the brief opportunities for the female voice to be heard, were quickly lost in the reassertion of male authority. The